

# EMERGENCY PLANNING: PRACTICING THE PLAN

By Francois Burman, Pr. Eng, MSc.

**I**n the previous three articles in this series, we discussed what can go wrong, why we need an emergency action plan (EAP) and what makes a good EAP. Now we will consider who executes the process of an essential, realistic and effective plan.

First, be sure to consider the different surroundings that could change and potentially render your plan less able to mitigate the emergency. Your plan should be able to accommodate some degree of inevitable change.

Your EAP will not work if you simply try to use someone else's plan. Each dive center, dive site and geographical location is different: Situations, weather and water conditions, access, availability of suitable emergency medical services providers and even staff skills might vary. While EAPs may address some common elements, each plan should be individualized.

If the EAP does not work at a critical stage, you need a backup plan. If a vital emergency number is out of service, who else should you call?

## THE MAIN ROLES

Ensuring a realistic and effective plan takes more than a compiler; all members of the staff hierarchy need to be involved. In small operations, staff members may have multiple roles.

- **Leadership:** Management should lead by example with commitment, interest and intent. These characteristics can ensure that the business recovers from most emergencies.
- **Compiler:** Appoint an experienced person or consultant to draft EAPs.
- **Implementer:** Authority, credibility and attention to detail define this role. Test EAPs for effectiveness, achievability and efficiency. Formulate alternatives to critical steps during simulations.
- **Trainer:** Someone with good teaching skills and the ability to hold attention will achieve the best outcome.



Careful planning, preparation and training with the specific equipment used in your emergency plan is crucial. Take the time to walk through your EAP with your real-world equipment, and train yourself and others in its proper use.

- **Staff:** All staff members need to accept their roles and take them seriously. Management can help encourage the staff's attitudes.

## EMERGENCY DRILLS: PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

An EAP is only as good as the practice it receives. With regular practice, skills and reactions will remain effective and new staff who were not present for the initial training can learn the plan. Complacency and neglect can hinder even the best plan.

Drills should be scheduled regularly and can be both announced and unannounced. Performance stress, peer observation and timekeeping develop confidence and the ability to react without overthinking. Reward and encourage participants; punishment for mistakes reduces confidence.

Debriefing after drill practice will reinforce essential steps and actions. Remember that failures to act appropriately during drills are predictors of future performance failures. You depend on your team to perform when under real pressure, so they need to be trained and confident to do the right things when situations start to fall apart.

## BE PREPARED

Your team needs to understand the situation and be able to prioritize actions when faced with emergencies. While risk will always be present, improved knowledge, understanding and preparedness remain our best means of reducing the negative outcomes of accidents and the added burden of liability in the event of any emergency. **AD**